

durango, colorado

woolly, but plush

by Horace Sutton

WHILE WE are all getting up a good head of steam about the Bicentennial, Durango, Colo., is thinking about its 100th birthday, still five years away.

It wasn't until September, 1880 that the surveyors sent by the lively Denver and Rio Grande RR began laying out the streets of Durango. Lots were put on the market for as little as \$250, and a sawmill and a brickyard came to town for the convenience of the new settlers. Bricks cost \$4.50 a thousand.

The cause of the commotion was the silver strike three years earlier in the environs of Silverton, 45 miles away. The woods were full of prospectors sending their ore down to the Durango smelter by ox cart and stagecoach.

TOO OFTEN the carts went tumbling over the side of the steep canyon walls. Pressed into service as freight haulers, stagecoaches were often waylaid by highwaymen. It was a hard life, and the prospectors staggered

wearily into Durango for a little R. and R.

Before the first year was out the New York Mining Co. had set up a giant smelter to boil down not only silver, but lead and zinc. Early in the fall the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad brought its tracks into town, and pushed onward to Silverton.

A budding entrepreneur named Henry Strater, not yet twenty years old, realized Durango had everything but a luxury hotel. So he borrowed the money and built one.

In 1885 a travel writer named Crofutt published a guidebook called "Crofutt's Grip-Sack Guide of Colorado" in which he lamented that Durango "has lost almost entirely the character of the usual frontier town and fairly won the position of residential center."

TO THE visitor who comes to Durango today, strange to say, the town seems the very essence of a frontier settlement of the woolly West. Strater's hotel is not only still there, it is better than ever. At

night its Diamond Belle saloon, cut-velvet walls, bullet-pocked gilded bar and all, rocks with the music of an upright piano.

Melodrama is performed nightly in the summer in the Strater's Diamond Circle Theater. The hotel's old opera house is being brought to life, decorated with Tiffany glass and a stained-glass window resurrected from a Denver church. Sitting at tables, patrons will dine and see shows the likes of George M. Cohan's "The Tavern."

The present patron, Earl Barker, and his wife Jent-

ra have combed the deep South for antiques with which they have furnished the rooms. Guests who occupy chamber No. 322 will pay \$22 a night to sleep in a carved mahogany bed that endured the siege of Vicksburg. The walls of some rooms have been pared down to the original brick, but all have been fitted with private bath and air-conditioning.

MANY SUMMER visitors come to town for the express purpose of riding the Rio Grande's Silverton train, one of the last remaining narrow-gauge

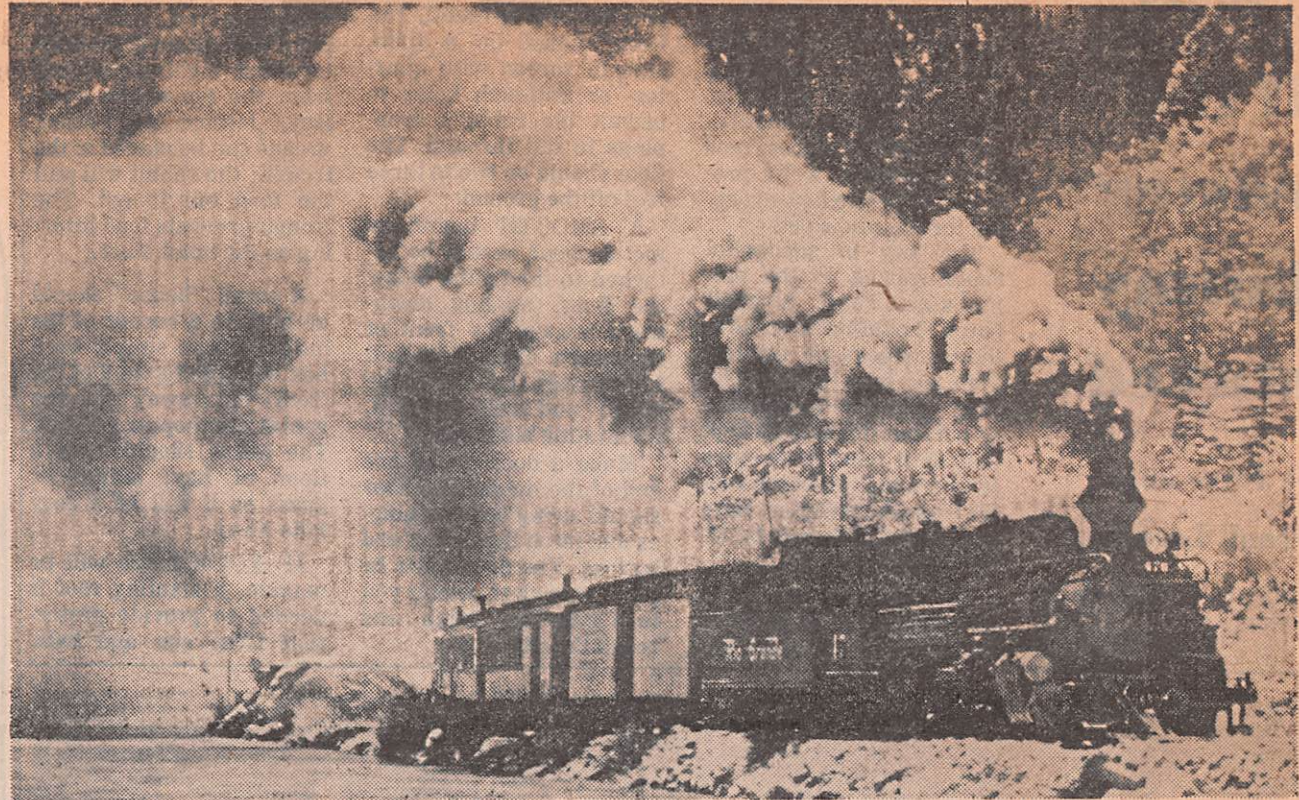
railways in the nation. The ordinary carriages, some of which date back to the 1870s, are pulled by coal-burning engines during the 3½ hour ride to the old mining center.

A rail ticket costs \$10 per person round trip, but whole carriages that were once private railway cars can be hired by groups. A plush 18-passenger model complete with icebox, stove, and galley can be hooked up to the coach cars for \$345.

SOME OF the old private cars still bear posted menus from the Silverton Northern Railroad offering

sardine sandwiches for a quarter, a pint of Mumm's Extra Dry champagne for \$2.50. Chile con carne was the same price as Russian caviar — 50 cents a portion.

There are no menus with those kinds of prices in today's Durango, but there are plenty of colorful places to eat, many of them operated by young people who first came to Durango for the open life of skiing in winter and fishing in summer. The Ore House, black as a mine pit, will wash away anyone's troubles with a "miner's martini" — five ounces of gin in a martini glass "as big as the Rockies."



The Silverton, one of the last of the narrow gauge lines, still chugs its way up the San Juan from Durango to Silverton, hauling passengers instead of ore during summer season.